

GAO Finds Need to Improve Response Accuracy of 1-800-MEDICARE Helpline

In March 1999, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) implemented a telephone helpline--1-800-MEDICARE--to provide information about program eligibility, enrollment, and benefits. The helpline has seen surges in beneficiary inquiries since implementation of the sweeping Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 (MMA) began; CMS decided earlier this year to route all enrollee calls on specific claims to the phone number.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently released a report that raises questions about the accuracy of the information provided through the helpline and recommends steps to improve monitoring of the accuracy of answers as well as the information available to helpline staff to respond to inquiries. In addition, certain call topics often were transferred to other contractors that were closed at the time of the call, GAO found. Earlier this year, GAO released a report that found serious problems with the accuracy of responses given to provider inquiries at Medicare contractor call centers.

In evaluating the 1-800-MEDICARE helpline, one of the areas of Medicare coverage GAO evaluated for response accuracy concerned coverage criteria for power-operated wheelchairs, an area that has come under increased scrutiny this year. In addition to finding improper re-routing of those calls to closed contractors, GAO noted instances of inaccurate responses. GAO felt it was crucial to provide information that coverage for the wheelchairs is dependent upon a physician's prescription for them, and that the beneficiary would be obligated to pay a significant co-payment (approximately \$1,000). GAO noted that the script provided to call center staff needed better content in order to answer questions more appropriately.

As an example, GAO referenced a response it received to one of its test calls. The call center representative misread the requirement related to upper body strength, or "trunk strength," of the Medicare beneficiary, GAO noted. The call center staff mistakenly informed GAO that the beneficiary must have adequate "trunk space" in order to qualify for a power wheelchair, explaining that there must be adequate trunk space in his or her car to hold the power wheelchair. In actuality, the coverage criteria are meant to distinguish between individuals who can operate a standard wheelchair--those with adequate "trunk strength"--and those who would require a power wheelchair.

The Medicare helpline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Each year, it handles millions of phone calls from across the country from beneficiaries inquiring on the gamut of Medicare issues. Home health agencies and hospices have indicated that incorrect understandings of coverage criteria by beneficiaries or their families could be related to inaccuracy of responses from the Medicare helpline.

Nevertheless, the helpline provides a starting point for consumers and their families to understand a very complicated Medicare program. In its response to the GAO recommendations, CMS indicated its ongoing efforts to improve the accuracy and accessibility of the helpline continually.

The GAO report is entitled "Medicare: Accuracy of Responses from the 1-800-MEDICARE Helpline Should Be Improved," ([GAO-05-130, December 2004](#)) and is available on GAO's website at www.gao.gov/new.items/d05130.pdf.